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## EROS WITH A VENEER: TRANSLATING EROTICA IN ANCIENT COMEDY

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**Abstract:** Using Plautus' comedies as an example, the article shows how the translation of erotica has varied depending on the dominant habits and customs of a given period. It underlines two opposite trends: one allows an increasing license to evoke fantasy; the other inhibits the graphic and vulgar side of the texts (especially in the choice of language). If an erotic pun in the original evokes only sexual associations and allusions, translators often feel obliged to be bold in their rendering of the text. But there can be no consenting to the use of vulgar language. On the one hand, translators are hindered by the conviction that language of the characters in ancient plays should not appear too modern. On the other hand, dictionaries offer a practically biblical (or merely archaic) vocabulary when it comes to the obscene. In effect, erotica usually tends to sound more archaic than the rest of the text.

**Keywords:** ancient comedy, erotica in translation, Plautine comedy in Polish translation, Plautus

“All literary texts are conditioned historically and depend on the time and place of their production.” This statement would elicit a nod of approval from literary historians, critics, and ordinary readers alike. What we much less frequently realise is that “the task of interpretation is in equal measure enmeshed into its own time and place in culture” (Heydel 1994: 29).<sup>1</sup> An

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<sup>1</sup> Both quotes come from an article by Magda Heydel (1994), in which the author emphasises that interpretation in an act of translation considers cultural differences, among other things:

“Every element of the text at every single level of its organisation is suffused with contextual meanings; it becomes imbued with the culture within which it functions. Taking the text out of its native horizon and transplanting it into another is an operation performed at the cost of the modifications of the contextual meanings of all the textual components. They are generated anew in a different environment, and are accordingly different from those in

act of translation is always an interpretation of the original (see Barańczak 1992: 21; Legeżyńska 1985); as such, it comes as no surprise that translators use different, sometimes extremely dissimilar strategies to render the characteristic features of the culture of the original, and that their choice of strategies is tied to the historical period in which they are working.

The most striking differences are often visible in how erotica is rendered in different languages, as the translators consider the social norms and limitations of good taste imposed by the times in which they live and work.<sup>2</sup> We might even hazard the suggestion that, every so often, it is the translator who unconsciously applies the corset of moral propriety, becoming his/her own censor.<sup>3</sup> A particularly interesting case of such censorship of the original can be found in translations of ancient literature, especially in renderings of pagan works, where the world does not always function according to the social norms that held sway in Christian Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A stumbling block for translators at that time was the unrestrained language of Antiquity: the modern era was much more moderate in this respect, and did not allow for obscene or scatological remarks in a literary text, or even allusions. A typical example might be Aristophanes' comedies, where the text forces the translator to find the appropriate terms for genitalia, as they are spangled with such terms as *kuśka*, *kutas* (cock, prick) or even *dupa* (ass) – phrases which, until recently, were replaced with an ellipsis in Polish.<sup>4</sup> One might suppose, then, that with the relaxation of social

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the original. An act of translation is then a meeting of two different worlds; it is a meeting that demands awareness of and respect for the differences between those who participate in it" (trans. A.K.-P.).

<sup>2</sup> Lucyna Spyryka enumerates the problems faced by translators of contemporary Slovak erotic poetry and notes: "there is no clear-cut definition of pornography; the borderline between erotica and pornography is established variously, depending on the artistic convention of the time, the prudishness of the society and, finally, on a domain that seems to be separate from art, i.e. politics" (Spyryka 1994: 121).

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating study on the history of such translatorial self-censorship was penned by John Milton. As he underlines, Fanshawe, Dryden, Coweley, Johnson, Pope and Tytler (English translators of ancient literature) honestly believed that they were allowed to "correct" the original through changes, euphemisms or omission of issues (e.g. homosexual practices, rape or adultery) discordant with the customs and habits of the time. Milton even postulates that censorial inclinations tend to occur in translators functioning in societies that are closed to outside ideas and which suffer from a superiority complex over other languages and cultures (see Milton 1994: 141–146).

<sup>4</sup> These are the terms used by Janina Ławińska-Tyszkowska in the most recent translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (ll. 124, 134, 143, 996, 1001; see Aristophanes 2003: II, 104–173).

customs and the growing acceptance of vulgarities in literary works, a visible change in this respect would follow in the domain of translation. And yet, though it may be more expressive, the language used in translations of ancient works still refuses to cross a certain line. Let us analyse several examples in the evolution towards greater freedom in expressing the erotic, as well as the mechanisms which hinder or accelerate the process.

## Eros and imagination

Generally speaking, the erotica in Roman comedies (most often in works by Plautus) leaves plenty to the viewers' imagination. Though it is quite bold, it rarely makes explicit references, preferring to rely on allusions and puns to elicit the desired associations. Nonetheless, constructing such associations in translation requires courage, in varying amounts throughout the ages, depending on the social acceptance for speaking, or even thinking of "such things."

The most substantial transformation can be observed in the translation of the conclusion of Act 5 of *Miles gloriosus* (The Braggart Soldier), where the protagonist is threatened with castration for attempted adultery.<sup>5</sup> The whole scene is grounded in word play, with the double meaning of the word *testis*, which on the one hand means *testicle* and on the other, a *testimony* or a *witness*; as the root of various attributes (*intestatus*, l. 1416; *intestabilis*, l. 1417), it is utilised to describe a man devoid of honour and valour, who cannot rely on the support of evidence or witnesses. Plautus employs this paronomasia (the allusion to the loss or preservation of testicles as the loss or preservation of honour), clearly suggesting that its meaning is not purely metaphorical.

The manner in which individual translators have tackled this particular pun indicates social changes in the sphere of the erotic. The oldest Polish translation, i.e. the version from the late nineteenth century by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, mentions belly cutting, evisceration and saving one's skin. Another translation by Jan Wolfram, produced at about the same time, mentions *wyrzynanie* (hacking), but does not explain what is meant to be "hacked off." When the adversary warns the adulterer that next time he is caught he will be castrated (*carebis testibus*, l. 1420), Wolfram renders the

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss this pun in more detail in my reflections on Plautus' Polish translations (Skwara 1996).

threat as: *oberzną ci uszy!* (I'll hack your ears off!). The translator justifies his censorship of the phrase in a commentary below the text: "I must confess that my translation is not literal, but it is more aesthetically pleasing than the original." This means, however, that those unversed in Latin will not learn what part of the body the soldier is really supposed to lose.

Another rendering of the passage by Gustaw Przyczocki hails from the 1930s and does not allude to the belly, but (more directly) to the underbelly, and achieves some of the ambiguity Plautus originally intended, as the soldier states that he would wish to escape the situation *bez uszczerbku na swych członkach* (with all his members intact; Plautus 1934: 226–230).

Considering that the playwright is rarely unequivocally literal and willingly employs erotic and obscene allusions and associations, in my own translation I used the association with *honory* (honour): the soldier is afraid that he will be forced to *żyć bez honoru* (live without honour) and begs that he may *zachować swe męskie honory* (preserve his male honour intact); the cook promises to let him go *z całymi honorami* (with all his honour), whereas the old neighbour warns that if he catches the soldier again, he will *pozbawi [go] honorów* (strip him of his honour, Plautus 2002: 154–158).

The change described above is a shift that has occurred in the translation of erotic and obscene puns, typical of the Polish renderings of Plautine comedies: from an overall transformation of meaning into a more modest proposal, through translation by omission or translation by equivalence.

This evolution was undoubtedly aided by social changes that took place in the course of the twentieth century. It is of some significance that translation of the erotic undertones of Plautus' humour remains a task that demands not the use of erotically-tinged vocabulary, but (or as much as) reference to the viewers' erotic imagination. Plautus' puns are, to a large degree, based on word play, where the obscene allusion or the associations are revealed<sup>6</sup> only because of the final reaction of one of the characters (usually this reaction is utterly unexpected by the viewers).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of humour, based on disappointed expectations, is known to the Polish audience from the programmes of the Poznań cabaret Tey. Such neutral questions or statements as "Can you still...?" or "I have this small thingie..." would acquire an indecent undertone in the performances by the Smoleń–Laskowik duo only after the interlocutor's response: "Sure, I can" or "Well, it's not my fault."

<sup>7</sup> Jokes of this sort became very popular in Roman comedy: such a joke is completed when it ends in an unexpected manner or, more precisely, when it does not end in a standard or expected way. Accordingly, "disappointed expectations" (*para prosdokian*) consist in pro-

This kind of humour requires, above all, that the allusion be comprehended. For example, in Plautus' comedy *Aulularia* (The Pot of Gold) the protagonist, a stingy old man, demands the return of a pot full of gold from a slave whom he suspects of theft. Among a series of phrases used in the play there appears one verb in the imperative: *pone* – “put,” “place,” “stick in” (*Aul.* l. 627). When he says: *pone!*, the miser demands his gold be returned to him. There would be nothing unusual about this, were it not for the slave's reaction: he cries out in indignation (in a literal translation): *Id quidem pol te dare credo consuetum, senex* (By Pollux, I do believe, old man, that you are used to giving it like that). The crux of the pun resides in the homonymic *pone*, which is used by the miser as an order: *put it [here]!*, but which is interpreted by the slave as an adverb meaning *from behind*, and mistaken for a sexual offer.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, the translator is faced with the task of finding an equivalent of *pone* not only to express the neutral meaning, but also to bring out the erotic associations. An aforementioned translator of Plautus, Wolfram, makes the miser call out: *Dawaj!* (Give it to me!) to which the slave responds with: *Tak? To ty, stary, lepiej znasz ode mnie* (Really? This is something you know better than I do, old boy; Plautus 1873: 89). The translator may have realised that his version did not mirror the double sense of *pone* used in the original, as his footnote states: „*Pone* is ambiguous here.” A similar solution was used by Przychocki: *Dawaj! – To ty, dziadu, ty się na tym znasz najlepiej* (Give it to me! – Old man, this is something that you know best!; Plautus 1934: 510). It is hard to decide whether the translators could not or *would* not come up with a phrase understood as an incentive for further intimacy. One has to admit that when the recipient already knows the reason for the slave's resentment, they start to perceive the sexual undertone of the verb *dawać* (to give). Without this explanation, however, the meaning of the sentences is unclear. It is worth noting that Przychocki's translation gives the actor the opportunity to express the joke non-verbally with the twice-repeated personal pronoun *ty* (you).

Making use of a much greater margin of social and linguistic freedom than that available to the previous translators, I hazarded a bolder translation. The old man holds out his coat in a graphic manner to take the stolen

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viding an unexpected response that contradicts the expectations of the recipient of the joke; cf. Plautus *Capt.* 2, 136; Terence *Heaut.* 981.

<sup>8</sup> The adverb *pone* was often used in order to make a sexual proposition (see Wagner 1979: 149, fn. 629).

pot and demands from the slave: *Wsadź mi!* (Stick it in here!), to which the servant indignantly responds: *No, co ty, stary, tobie jedno w głowie!* (Come off it, old man! You have only one thing on your mind!; Plautus 2003: 189–190). This phrase has not met with any criticism from reviewers or editors, which may be seen as consent to bolder solutions in the translation of ancient literature.

## Eros and language

A certain level of wantonness in triggering the recipient's imagination does not automatically lead to the acceptance of licentious language. Neither translators nor readers/viewers would consent to an excessive modernity of style in their ancient protagonists: coarse language remains invariably indicative of the current idiom.

Archaic words that are somewhat outmoded are not considered erotic in tone, even if they were once obscene or vulgar. The tendency towards old-fashioned vocabulary in ancient texts can be seen most clearly in dictionary entries which use Polish equivalents of various expletives that are almost biblical in tone, such as *cudzołożnik* (adulterer; *moechus*), *ladacznica* (harlot; *scortum*) and *męskie przyrodzenie* (privy parts; *mentula*). Thus, the dictionary itself imposes word choices whose expressiveness has faded with the passing of time.

It therefore comes as no surprise that translators move within a closed circle of outdated words which give no impression of bawdiness and indecency in contemporary Polish. A term quite often used by Plautus (but never by the elegant Terence) is *scortum*, the word that literally denotes *skin*, and metonymically reduces someone (irrespective of their sex) to the skin used for intercourse. In Polish, a similar metonymic expression reduces a person's (usually a woman's) physical attributes to a single four-letter body part, but thus far no translator has dared to use this solution.

In the comedy *Bacchides* (The Two Bacchides) the term *scortum* appears five times (ll. 72, 429, 743, 1081, 1189). Przychocki translates it with the Polish *dziewka* (wench; Plautus 1935: 144, 169, 193, 218, 229), which I alternate in my own translation with the word *kokota* (cocotte; Plautus 2004: 34, 105, 142).<sup>9</sup> Another comedy by Plautus, *Captivi* (The Prisoners),

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<sup>9</sup> These synonyms are also employed interchangeably because of the usage of rhyme in the translation.

which has been translated into Polish several times (Wolfram, Przychocki, Skwara), presents a wider repertoire of equivalents, as *scortum* is rendered as *nierządnicza* (harlot), *kochanka* (lover), *dziewka* (wench), *dziewczyzna* (girl), *kokota* (cocotte) and *kurtyzana* (courtesan).<sup>10</sup> All translators used the same solution: old-fashioned vocabulary, whose meaning and connotations are still comprehensible, but whose veneer of antiquity deprives them of the potency of a vulgar invective. In no translation of Plautus' works is *scortum* rendered with the indecent use of metonymy I have mentioned.

In light of this, it might seem strange that, although the same obscene four-letter word appears in a current translation of Aristophanes, which sanctions it in a way, Plautus' translators have not introduced it into their versions of his comedies. The explanation for this enigma is simple. In the Plautine works the term functions as a literal term for a body part, an expression that became a part of Polish language and literature, though it is still considered distasteful. In this context words such as *pudenda*, *srom* (vulva) or *kuciapka* (cunny) would result in excessive archaisation that would add a comical overtone unintended by the original author. On the other hand, in Plautus' comedies the use of the word *dupa* (ass) in its metonymic meaning would be considered rude or simply unacceptable.

It seems, then, that the same term can be, by turns, acceptable and forbidden: it all depends on whether its use, either literal or metaphorical, is considered merely crude and harsh, or downright obscene and vulgar. The measure is in the connotations of the word and its uses.<sup>11</sup>

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Translators of ancient comedies do not use the most modern vocabulary in their rendering of erotica, as this would be considered offensive. In translation, the ancient Eros is always chronologically older than the rest of

<sup>10</sup> The term *scortum* recurs in Plautus' *Captivi* in the space of a few lines (ll. 69, 72, 73). Wolfram interchangeably uses *nierządnicza* (harlot) and *kochanka* (lover; Plautus 1873: 309); Przychocki – *dziewka* (wench) and *dziewczyzna* (girl; Plautus 1937: 10), whereas in my translation I chose *kokota* (cocotte) and *kurtyzana* (courtesan; Plautus 2004: 175).

<sup>11</sup> This is why, in translations of Aristophanes' comedies, the word *kutas* (cock) appears only when it is considered archaic. What Ławińska-Tyszkowska (Aristophanes 2003: 112) translates as: *Trzymać się trzeba z dala od kutasa* (You need to keep your distance from the cock), takes the following shape in an older translation by Cieglewicz (Aristophanes 1910: 14): *Więc trzeba będzie... wyrzec się... miłości!* (So one needs to... relinquish... love!), and in Srebrny's version (Aristophanes 1977: 379) becomes: *Wstrzymać trzeba się od... tego* (One has to abstain from... this).

the text: he might cause the cheeks of older readers to blush, but then, no translator would dare to introduce such a god of love into their language. Although we do accept that ancient comedy is suffused with erotica, we do not approve of Eros' wantonness and lack of restraint.

**trans. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik**

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